

1141 Essay #1

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The Fate of *Oedipus Rex*

Fate and destiny are often words associated with mythology and ancient times. That or hopeless romantics dreaming of a perfect world. The ancient Greeks believed that fate played a role in everyone's life at some point. It is often contested whether or not it is possible to avoid one's fate and fool one's prophecy. In the play *Oedipus Rex*, there is a debate as to whether Oedipus brought his fate upon himself or if he fell victim to a prophecy. Throughout the play, it becomes clear that it is his ignorance, along with his parents' ignorance, brings his downfall.

First of all, some blame must be placed upon Oedipus' parents. They were aware of the prophecy, so they take "protective" measures, that ultimately end up setting in motion the foreseen prophecy. Once they sent him away at birth, they severed any way of Oedipus knowing that Laios and Jocasta are his parents. For example, it is said that Oedipus will murder his father. When Oedipus meets his father, he is ignorant that it is his father, and ignorant to his prophecy. Naturally, when the two get into an argument, Oedipus kills his father unknowingly. "His [Oedipus] temper gets the better of him, and he murders his opponents, who, unbeknownst to him, include Laios, Oedipus' true father (*Oedipus Rex*, Intro)". In this situation, it seems fault lies on the father, for not educating his son of the prophecy and for giving him away in the first place. As the plot thickens, the prophecy says that Oedipus will marry his mother. Marrying your own mother seems easy enough to avoid. After Oedipus kills his father and defeats the sphinx plaguing Thebes, he becomes king. At this point his mother should really see some red flags jumping up when she's about to marry a man named Oedipus. While Oedipus is ignorant to what he is doing, Jocasta should have known better than to marry a man who would be about her son's age and shares the same name as him.

Oedipus' own ignorance is responsible for his downfall. The next part of Oedipus' tragic tale is the fact that he swears to banish the man responsible for killing the prior king. Oedipus declares "I solemnly forbid the people of this country, where power and throne are mine, ever to receive that man [the murderer] or to speak to him, no matter who he is, or let him join in sacrifice, lustrations, or prayer. I decree he be driven from every house (Prologue. Lines 20-24)." Oedipus believes this will rid Thebes of the plague, but he does not know he is the cause. Another example of his ignorance, or stupidity, as he must have realized he was killing a king when he did, because Jocasta tells Oedipus that "There were five men with him [Laios] in all: one was a herald" (Scene 2. 225-226). Oedipus has just sealed his own fate because he realizes the man he killed was a king. After Oedipus learns that he is the man that he swore to seek out and exile, he blinds himself and leaves Thebes, while his wife commits suicide.

The ancient Greeks believed that fate was a predetermined outcome of one's life, and that attempts to avoid a "predetermined" fate were futile. As shown in *Oedipus Rex*, however, fate had no role in the characters' lives, as each person made specific choices which led to Oedipus' tragic downfall. The Greeks believed fate already knew what would happen, but if Oedipus had in fact already known what he was predicted to do, then he would not have done it, and the story would not have happened.

In the end, fate did not play a role in the tragedy of Oedipus' life. His downfall was his ignorance due to his parents' ironic attempts to cheat the prophecy they were scared of. Had everyone just carried on life as normal, things probably would have turned out better. Fate is an idea that they allowed to rule their ironic lives.

Delbanco, Nicholas, and Alan Cheuse. Oedipus. Literature: Craft and Voice. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2010.